TOEIC Test Planning and Practice:
When Does Most Learning Occur?

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Introduction

This paper outlines a method adopted for teaching TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) test reading preparation. It has been used and refined since the first semester 2004 with first and second year ESP (English for Specific Purposes) classes at Fukuoka University. Following consecutive semesters of presentation and evaluation, the methodology aims to promote more peer, group-oriented, learner focused lessons, while maintaining an effective level of teacher focused explanation. The information presented is based on personal teaching experience with the aim to encourage instructors to analyse the way they plan their courses and the structure of lessons, with a focus on timing and negotiated group output.

The experience related in this paper concerns the planning of and methodology used for the reading sections of the TOEIC test before changes were made to that test from early 2006. Although reading section 6, error recognition, will no longer be a feature of future tests, this does not
diminish the perceived benefits of the described group work approach, as it can be used in a variety of ESP and general English lesson contexts and can complement the advice for TOEIC listening and reading provided by Forster and Karn (1998).

**Content and method**

Teacher’s books for the TOEIC test such as the Oxford Preparation Course (2003) predominantly feature notes on test content with scant reference to the way lessons are organized. In the context of TOEIC listening preparation, Ogawa and Kondo (2006, p.5) limit suggestions for effective methodology to the encouragement of students to help each other, exchange ideas and brainstorm together. It is up to teachers to decide what content to focus on and how much time to allocate for this. When planning ESP courses, content is arranged according to the amount of time for each lesson and the total course. The TOEIC test format is approximately half listening and half reading, so lesson and course content will vary greatly compared to the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test which covers all macro skills.

A perception of ESP courses is one of students learning individually, effectively assuming and depending on all lesson input from the teacher. The students listen for the entire lesson. By themselves, they follow the teacher’s reference to each question, problem solving skill, correct and incorrect answer and any other advice. A class most often comprises learners who receive a controlled flow of teacher input to process in order to develop test taking skills on an individual basis. It cannot be assumed however, that students do or can process teacher input, particularly if all
directions and explanations are provided in English. Furthermore, students might not actively review their notes regularly, effectively limiting their acquisition of test taking skills which are at least required for end of semester ESP examinations. A negative effect of the perceived importance of content rather than skills is that students believe that they can successfully cram for examinations by memorizing copious notes and isolated vocabulary items without considering the skills practiced in lessons. Emphasis on remembering content as opposed to familiarity with test format, timing, question types and the way to approach these needs to be addressed by course planners and learners if comprehensive aims of an ESP course are to be achieved. A similar belief is expressed by Davies (2005, p.9) who states that the dependence on test preparation content ‘removes both the teacher and students from their creative roles in the classroom and reinforces the erroneous belief that language learning simply in order to pass a test is a worthwhile goal.’

**Lesson format**

In practice, an ESP course of any type can be enhanced to be arguably more effective in its goals through focused group work. It is this aspect of methodology which is suggested to promote more active student input through quality timed peer interaction. Another strength is the dynamic role of the teacher during a lesson, including facilitator of activities, timekeeper and active monitor of group discussion.

A suggested lesson format features two phases. In the initial phase, students arrange themselves into groups of three or four. Pairs offer less chance for brainstorming and discussing ideas and groups of more than
four allow less proficient students to contribute less while sharing a group’s score achieved by more proficient students. The teacher distributes a single, group answer sheet onto which all answers are recorded. A completed answer sheet will simply feature multiple choice answers and isolated vocabulary items without context.

The teacher then explains the nature of the group activity, which might focus on one of these topics: vocabulary, word form, grammar, subject/object agreement, repeated word meanings, use of apostrophes and so on. Students are told the number of questions and the time allocated to discuss and answer these. One worksheet with large font is then distributed to each group for discussion. Practice of any of the mentioned topics can, for example include 10 sentences with 10 minutes allocated. This is ample time to complete such an activity compared with that allowed for an actual TOEIC test. Nevertheless, the point is that through repeated practice, students become aware of the importance of timing in formal testing. If a group completes their answers quickly, the teacher, whose role in this phase is one of supervisor, can check and give feedback on the number of errors or specific advice.

At the end of the time allocated, the teacher collects the paper with questions for the first activity so that the attention of learners remains focused as a group on each separate activity. The teacher explains the nature of the next activity as well as the time allowed. Then the worksheet with the next activity is distributed and the process of discussion repeats until five or six activities have been completed. This first phase of the lesson takes approximately one hour.

The second phase of the lesson allows more focused (and therefore
potentially more meaningful) explanations as the teacher takes on the active role to clarify and validate the student’s answers. First, all the answers for the activities in the first phase are provided briefly and groups check their scores. These can then be recorded by the teacher for assessment purposes. Detailed reasons for the correct (and perhaps incorrect) answers can then be explained. Students record the answers on worksheets with complete sentences, the same as those distributed for discussion, so that the correct answers have a clear context. This serves to reinforce vocabulary and grammar key points, not only during a particular lesson, but also for the purpose of topic revision, actual TOIEC test preparation and end of term examinations.

Timed group work in an ESP lesson is not particularly unusual, nor failsafe. However, successive semesters using this approach of group TOEIC style activities have consistently featured the following perceived advantages. Learners focus on key points peer to peer. They negotiate meaning and communicate with an informality that promotes learning on their terms. Three or four minds actively contribute ideas as opposed to a classroom of silent individuals who may or may not understand a teacher’s explanation. These factors contribute to learner motivation and a focus on thinking processes for the tasks at hand rather than on overall test scores.

It is true that lack of motivation can be a disadvantage and that for some students various reasons inhibit their active participation in group activities. Certain test taking strategies can be taught with group activities related particularly to TOEIC test reading part V, where there is a focus on linguistic structures as opposed to meaning. This focus-on-forms methodology, based on a structural syllabus, is discussed by Long (1991) and in a
TOEIC context by Williams (2005). A potential weakness is that students will focus on meaning rather than structure.

Another feature of group work is that the actual communication is nearly always conducted in Japanese, which may seem ironic in an English class. This will depend on the goals of the course; negotiation of question types or increased English proficiency. In a context other than TOEIC reading, there would certainly be the expectation that learners would try to speak in English, such as practice for the speaking component of the IELTS test.

When curriculum planners develop a specific type of course, such as ESP, they decide what type of content to present, how much is appropriate for an activity, lesson or sequence of lessons and whether this material is covered earlier or later in a lesson or course. Perhaps more importantly, when considering what they expect learners to achieve and how, there should be a conscious assessment of learner needs. A potential flaw is an assumption that students actually chose to enroll in an ESP course and perhaps intend to take an official TOEIC test. However, in both respects, this is not always the case. Nevertheless, instructors faced with a large class of students who for various reasons do not wish to rigorously prepare for any particular language proficiency test can still enjoy the benefits of enhanced student input and motivation by using the group work approach outlined.

When does most learning occur?

An essential component of lesson planning incorporating the suggested TOEIC group work methodology relies on instructors asking themselves
"What is the most productive phase and skill for learners?" Students might well assume that the most important goal is to receive the correct answers in the second phase of the lesson. They want to check whether their answers are correct and it is perhaps the time at which learner attention is most focused.

Although scores are a factor in the motivation of learners, their meaning should be viewed in the context of the processes in which they were achieved. This supports the fourth major point of Davies (1995, p.12); the integration of TOEIC and communication. Direct integration can only be achieved through communicative activities such as discussion around TOEIC core input or highlighting TOEIC tactics derived from communicative tasks. Indirect integration comes ‘via awareness-raising tasks applied to TOEIC input’ (Davies 1995, p.12). It is suggested that the initial phase of a lesson, incorporating group discussion is where most learning occurs. This is not owing to the time spent on this phase, but the quality of active participation.

Given the limited hours of formal instruction, the use of strategies in an ESP class that can motivate students provide a more realistic goal for a successful course than concerted test preparation. Again, the emphasis on content is tempered by the reality of time constraints within a single lesson and course. An appropriate syllabus should reflect this reality by not stating that students will be able to successfully complete a particular language proficiency test. If so, course goals may be too difficult to achieve. Course planners should be satisfied if learners can become familiar with how to approach the types of test items they may encounter, as more realistic ESP course aims include a focus on developing test taking skills.
Conclusion.

Clearly, factors determining the success of an ESP course must include affective and not only academic variables. Learner motivation is arguably as important as high test scores in an ESP course. This can be achieved through a variety of activities and approaches. The one suggested here is a focus on timed group work for reading, grammar and vocabulary practice, and also a variety of activity types, not for the sake of high scores, but for truly learner centred goals. Instructors need to state clear and achievable goals on their syllabuses. Extensive use of group work may not lead to increased English proficiency. However, given limited formal instruction, it is more realistic to familiarise learners with the format of tests and develop skills to attempt these. If this were achieved, instructors could confidently demonstrate how ESP course descriptions provided by Fukuoka University are being met.

References:


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